United Nations A/59/132/Add.2

General Assembly

Distr.: General
11 August 2004

Original: English

Fifty-ninth session
Item 66 (k) of the provisional agenda*
General and complete disarmament

Improving the effectiveness of the methods of work of the First Committee

Report of the Secretary-General

Addendum**

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* A/59/150.

** This information was received after the submission of the main report.

04-45762 (E) 090904

II. Replies received from States

M. United States of America

[Original: English]
[27 July 2004]

Introduction

1. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and subsequent events have demonstrated that the international community urgently needs to improve its ability to address both existing and new threats to international peace and security. This applies to the work of the First Committee, as well as of other United Nations and international bodies dealing with arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation issues. The United States believes that Member States should consider how the First Committee can best manage its annual schedule to permit a fuller examination of both its existing agenda and new threats to our common security. To do so, however, the First Committee needs to find ways to streamline its work. The Committee also needs to ensure that its agenda does not duplicate or subtract from important work being done in other United Nations bodies or outside the United Nations system. It was with those objectives in mind that, at the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly, the United States introduced its Improvement Initiative for the First Committee, which the General Assembly adopted as resolution 58/41 on 8 December 2003.

Complementarity

2. In resolution 58/41, the General Assembly expressly noted "the ongoing process in the open-ended informal consultations in the plenary on the revitalization of the Assembly chaired by its President", and sought to contribute to that effort. In adopting resolution 58/126 on 19 December 2003, the General Assembly not only gave significant impetus to this larger task, but also recognized "the ongoing efforts of the Main Committees to streamline their work" (annex, sect. B, para. 8). Finally, the Assembly, on 1 July 2004, adopted resolution 58/316, in which it decided that "each Main Committee shall give specific attention to the rationalization of their future agendas by biennialization, triennialization, clustering and elimination of items, and make recommendations to the plenary Assembly for its decision by 1 April 2005" (annex, sect. C, para. 3 (a)). The consensus adoption by the Assembly of all of these measures makes clear that improvement efforts within the First Committee are complementary to and consonant with revitalization efforts within the General Assembly as a whole.

Acknowledgements

3. The United States duly recognizes the dedicated efforts of the President of the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly, Foreign Minister Julian Hunte of Saint Lucia, to revitalize the General Assembly. The United States also commends the Deputy Permanent Representative of Finland, Ambassador Jarmo Sareva, on his performance as Chairman of the First Committee during its 2003 session and for the numerous consultations that he has conducted this year to promote the revitalization of the Committee.

Administrative modifications

4. The United States offers the following views and observations on improving the methods of work of the First Committee, based on its internal deliberations, as well as on consultations with other Member States, and taking into account the work that the General Committee of the General Assembly has already done in this regard. We emphasize the importance of proceeding in a transparent manner and, whenever possible, on the basis of consensus.

5. During the 2003 session of the First Committee, the delegation of Sierra Leone circulated an aide-memoire affirming that the improvement of the First Committee should be an integral part of the ongoing process of the revitalization of the General Assembly. The same aide-memoire suggested that the Committee could take some basic measures to improve its working methods, measures that would not require changes in the rules of procedure, nor measures that would involve substantive political issues. The United States agrees that the rules of procedure of the General Assembly grant all Main Committees the authority to enact such "basic measures" (or "best practices") to improve their respective work methods, and offers the following recommendations for enhancing the operations of the First Committee:

- Practice and expect punctuality when presiding over and attending meetings.
- Establish the practice of a "rolling" list of speakers for the general debate.
- Conclude the general debate within the first week of the annual session, as Chairman Sareva proposed in his aide-memoire of 19 February 2004. To achieve this, Member States would agree to speak for a maximum of five minutes to highlight the key elements of national statements that delegations would submit for the written record.
- To foster automaticity in this regard, a timed "green-amber-red" lighting system would be placed on the dais and be managed by the Secretariat, as is the practice in many United Nations bodies. The cost of such a system would be more than offset by savings in the cost of simultaneous interpretation over the long term.
- To encourage the development of consensus, extend the filing deadline for the tabling of draft resolutions and decisions to the last day of the second week of each annual session.
- When possible, adopt decisions rather than resolutions.
- Refrain from tabling "interim" draft resolutions that contain only technical updates and do not relate new developments, as the delegation of Canada suggested during the 2003 session of the First Committee.
- Keep preambular paragraphs to a minimum.
- Authorize the committee chair to find commonalities in the language and purpose of draft resolutions, and encourage mergers through consultations with all sponsors, as the delegation of Norway has suggested.

- Refrain from adding to draft resolutions or decisions the traditional operative paragraph placing an item on the agenda for the following year, as European Union delegations have suggested.

- The voting procedure followed by Chairman Sareva during the 2003 session of the First Committee worked well and should be the modus operandi for this year and for all future sessions of the Committee.

Streamlining the agenda

6. An analysis by the United States of the fifty-seventh and fifty-eighth session programmes of work of the First Committee indicates that, of the 53 items acted upon in the fifty-seventh session, 44 were repeated in the fifty-eighth session. Clearly, the practice of acting on agenda items year after year for little purpose other than ritualistic exercise should be discouraged. To this end, delegations should seek to consolidate similar measures into a single draft resolution, as noted above.

7. For instance, according to the preliminary list of items to be included in the provisional agenda of the fifty-ninth session of the General Assembly (A/59/50 and Corr.1), the First Committee technically handles only 16 agenda items. However, item 67 has 30 sub-items, item 68 has 8 sub-items and item 69 has 4 sub-items. Consequently, since each agenda item or sub-item represents a "stand-alone" resolution, the preliminary provisional agenda actually assigns 55 distinct issues to the First Committee this year.

8. As stated in resolution 58/126, "It would be advantageous for the General Assembly to have a shorter agenda to ensure the fullest discussion of all issues, so that its decisions may have greater impact" (sect. B, para. 5). Indeed, resolution 58/316 directed all Main Committees of the General Assembly to give specific attention, inter alia, to clustering (ibid.).

9. The United States therefore proposes that the General Assembly consolidate those 55 agenda items into 7 items. By rationalization, the United States further suggests that two agenda items handled elsewhere be joined with one or another of the seven new, streamlined First Committee items. Those recommendations are outlined in detail in the annex below.

Substantive improvements

10. In addition to streamlining the Committee's agenda, the United States offers still other suggestions to improve the operation of the First Committee. Unlike the administrative modifications outlined above, the substantive improvements for the agenda and operations of the Committee that follow would require the approval of the General Assembly, either via resolution or by amendment of the rules of procedure:

- Limit the number of studies commissioned by the First Committee.

- Set a numerical limit on the number of draft resolutions and decisions tabled each year.

- Introduce resolutions traditionally adopted by consensus only on a biennial or triennial basis.

- Institute automatic "sunset" provisions for all United Nations activities generated by the First Committee, thereby ensuring periodic review by the Committee.

- Begin the implementation of the provisions of paragraph 20 of resolution 57/300 of 20 December 2002 by consolidating reports initiated by the First Committee with other reports on related issues that the Secretariat is required to produce during a given session of the General Assembly.

- Elect the full Bureau of the Committee one year in advance, as the delegation of Argentina has suggested, perhaps at the conclusion of each annual session of the Committee. The General Assembly has made progress in advancing coordination and consultation through its adoption of resolutions 56/509 and 58/126, but more can be done.

- Instruct the Secretariat to review the statement of programme budget implications process with a view to improving the accuracy of its projections and increasing the advance notice provided to Member States regarding the financial implications of draft resolutions and decisions.

Next steps

11. The United States believes that, in compliance with resolutions 58/126 and 58/316, the First Committee should pursue internal rationalization at its 2004 session through a follow-on resolution recommending administrative and substantive improvements to methods of work of the First Committee. Those recommendations would be drawn from views offered by Member States in response to resolution 58/41, as well as during the deliberations of the 2004 session of the First Committee. Such a resolution would contain a request that the General Committee review the recommendations contained therein and make appropriate recommendations to the General Assembly before 1 April 2005.

Conclusion

12. Improvement and revitalization cannot be merely ends in themselves. Rather, they are means through which the Member States can strengthen global security by making multilateral arms control, disarmament and non-proliferation efforts ever more effective.

13. The consensus adoption of resolution 58/41 suggests the importance of the issue of improvement to Member States, as well as their commitment to making real progress in this area.

14. Whatever course of action Member States may decide upon for improving the effectiveness of the methods of work of the First Committee, the process should continue to be transparent and consensual. Certainly, doing nothing cannot be an option. If we, the builders and stewards of this important institution, do not repair it and make it more efficient and effective, the First Committee will do less and less that actually contributes to making the world a safer place.

Annex
Recommendations of the United States of America for clustering agenda items allocated to the First Committee[a]

I. Retained agenda item: General and complete disarmament (67)

The following existing agenda items would be folded into the item cited above: 24, Prevention of armed conflict, currently handled in the plenary, 62, 63, 66 and 67 (b), Further measures in the field of disarmament for the prevention of an arms race on the seabed and the ocean floor and in the subsoil thereof, currently handled in the plenary, and 67 (e), (h), (l), (n), (o) and (cc).

From the agenda of the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly,[b] the following item would be folded into the item cited above: 67, Review of the implementation of the Declaration on the Strengthening of International Security.

II. Proposed agenda item: Nuclear issues

The following existing agenda items would be folded into the new item proposed above: 65, 67 (a), (p), (q), (t), (x) and (aa), 68 (g) and 73.

From the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly, under item 73, General and complete disarmament, the question "A path to the total elimination of nuclear weapons" and items 73 (b), Prohibition of the dumping of radioactive wastes, 73 (c), Reduction of non-strategic nuclear weapons and 73 (j), Bilateral strategic nuclear arms reductions and the new strategic framework, would be folded into the new item proposed above.

III. Proposed agenda item: Other weapons of mass destruction

The following existing agenda items would be folded into the new item proposed above: 67 (d), (r) and (u) and 74.

IV. Proposed agenda item: Conventional arms control

The following existing agenda items would be folded into the new item proposed above: 67 (g), (j), (v), (y) and (z) and 71.

V. Proposed item: Confidence-building measures

The following existing agenda items would be folded into the new item proposed above: 59, 61, 67 (m) and (w) and 68 (h).

From the agenda of the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly, the following items would be folded into the new item proposed above: 62 (b), Objective information on military matters, including transparency of military expenditures.

VI. Proposed item: Regional security measures

The following existing agenda items would be folded into the new item proposed above: 60, 64, 67 (f), (i), (s) and (bb), 70 and 72.

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[a] Agenda items are keyed to document A/59/50 and Corr.1, unless otherwise noted.
[b] A/58/25 and Corr.1 and Add.1-4.

From the agenda of the fifty-eighth session of the General Assembly, the following items would be folded into the new item proposed above: 64, Implementation of the Declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace; 65, African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty; 66, Consolidation of the regime established by the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean (Treaty of Tlatelolco).

From the agenda of the fifty-seventh session of the General Assembly,[c] the following item would be folded into the new item proposed above: 59, Question of Antarctica.

VII. Proposed new agenda item: Disarmament machinery

The following existing agenda items would be folded into the new item proposed above: 58 (m) and (r), 67 (c) and (k), 68, 68 (a) to (f), 69 and 69 (a) to (d).

N. Brazil

[Original: English]
[28 July 2004]

1. As the Brazilian delegation stated during the general debate of the First Committee in October 2003, the recognized need to reactivate all United Nations political mechanisms must be explored in depth, including the Organization's mandate in the field of international peace and security. To face old and new threats, we must strengthen the multilateral framework and ensure the observance of the freely undertaken commitments, strict compliance by all States parties with the obligations defined in the major multilateral, legally binding instruments in the field of weapons of mass destruction, as well as their universalization, and a safer and more stable world.

2. It should be recalled that the Charter of the United Nations entrusts the General Assembly with specific functions and powers regarding not only disarmament and arms regulation, but also peace and security and the promotion of international political cooperation, on the understanding that the prerogatives of other principal organs must be fully preserved. Such a mandate has direct implications for the work of the First Committee. Better use could be made of provisions of Article 1, paragraph 4, Article 11, paragraph 1, and Article 13, paragraph 1 (a) of the Charter.

3. A larger role should be played by the General Assembly in considering the general principles of cooperation in the maintenance of international peace and security and in drawing the attention of the Security Council to situations that are likely to endanger peace and security. The Assembly should also increase its role in promoting cooperation in the political field, thus enhancing its contribution to the strengthening of international peace and security. Appropriate recommendations should be made to that effect.

[c] A/57/251/Rev.1.

4. The instrument relating to the pacific settlement of disputes, actions with respect to threats to peace, breaches of peace and acts of aggression, as well as regional arrangements — Chapters VI, VII and VIII of the Charter — should be urgently revisited.

5. A collective process of reflection and deliberation directed at identifying means for strengthening multilateral approaches to political and security affairs is an important endeavour that should be undertaken, and it goes well beyond reorganizing the agenda in a coherent and methodical way.

6. With regard to the practical suggestions debated in the First Committee, as well as those presented by its Chairman, Jarmo Sareva, in his non-paper dated 19 February 2004, based on resolution 58/126, the Brazilian mission expresses, with the following comments, its views on improving the effectiveness of the work methods used by the First Committee.

7. Considerations about the better use of time should be respectful of the right of delegations to express freely whatever they deem important and of the need to grant to each of them the appropriate amount of time. There should not be any shortening of the working period of the First Committee.

8. The possibility of excluding some items from the agenda should be carefully examined case by case. The repetition of resolutions lacking consensus does not indicate that such resolutions are obsolete. It simply reflects a dissimilarity of views in the international community about an issue that deserves to be debated, precisely for that reason. The forceful exclusion of any items would detract from the effectiveness of the First Committee.

9. Suggestions on the biennialization or triennialization of resolutions could come from the Chair, but decisions in this regard must be taken with the backing of the sponsors. The reorganization of the agenda of the First Committee in a reduced number of clusters could make it more clear and understandable. Furthermore, it would have the effect of concentrating the interventions of delegations.

10. The idea of condensation of the First Committee's programme of work into both morning and afternoon meetings would hamper the negotiation process among delegations, which is required for the preparation of draft resolutions.

11. The meetings of the First Committee should remain in the second half of the year, at the opening of the General Assembly, in order to highlight the priority of the discussion of the issues of disarmament and of the maintenance of international peace and security.

12. An early election of the Bureau could facilitate the follow-up of agreed subjects, as well as allow for the convening of advanced consultations with a view to the following session.